
Statement of

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Incoming Executive Director, District of Columbia Public
Library

Bill 16-734, the “Library Transformation Act of 2006”

Public Hearing
The Honorable Kathy Patterson, Chairman
Committee on Education, Libraries, and Recreation

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**John A. Wilson Building
1350 Pennsylvania Avenue, N.W.
Council Chamber, Room 500**

10:00 A.M.

Chairman Patterson and Members of the Committee, I appreciate the opportunity to speak to you to address the impact of good library services and the role of a central library in providing good library service.

I am Ginnie Cooper, Executive Director of the Brooklyn Public Library and incoming Executive Director of the District of Columbia Public Library. I bring more than 30 years of experience in library leadership, leading libraries in 5 states through transformation, as well as overseeing several hundred million dollar capital construction projects.

Introduction

As the new Library Director, I will be charged with setting the course for the District's Library system. Today I will talk about (1) what makes good library service, (2) my experience transforming libraries and (3) why a central library matters.

Good Library Service

Good library service is about books – from classics and best sellers to children's books. It is about new technology and materials such as downloadable books and music, tools to train and re-train our workforce, or tools to help adults learn to read.

Good libraries are civic and cultural centers, places where neighborhood groups hold meetings and where residents gather for special events, such as readings, speakers, or exhibits. Good library service is about providing access to information, to knowledge, to growth.

Library service is provided in many ways: via the internet, by librarians who visit schools and day care centers. And more. But, most important, library service is provided at library buildings: clean, safe, and open when people need and expect their libraries to be available.

These things – and more – are part of good library service. I have worked for more than 30 years to provide good library service.

The 2007 budget provides additional funds for library programs and operations, which will serve us well as we begin to craft a capital library for a capital city.

Experience Transforming Libraries

I have worked in libraries in 5 states and managed several hundred million dollar library capital construction projects. My library career is

marked by transforming public libraries. Every library where I have worked has been marked by challenges. And in every case I have met these challenges through good community collaboration and a clear focus on the value of libraries. I have inspired library staff and supporters, and worked to define and provide library service that reflects the needs and priorities of the community. Let me give you some examples:

Kenosha, Wisconsin (100,000 people): I took over a troubled library system in a blue-collar community facing industrial plant closings. There had not been investment in library technology or facilities in many years. I developed a strategic facilities plan for growth and renovation and worked with the City Council, the City Manager and the Mayor to acquire funding for capital projects. We built the first new library in 60 years – a library serving a previously underserved area, which became a destination for the whole community and a place of pride for residents. Library use more than doubled, and we secured commensurate increases in funding for books and other library operations.

Alameda County Library (East Side of San Francisco Bay Area): I assumed leadership of a library serving 400,000 people in 6 cities from 10 library buildings. The library had been shut down as a result of property tax cutting Proposition 13. My mandate was to bring the system back with redesigned library services. We succeeded – and I will tell you about three of our successes: (1) We developed adult literacy services for native English and limited-English speakers offered in and through local businesses and factories, run by people who knew it mattered for their workers to read and who showed their commitment through financial support and time by providing students and volunteer tutors. (2) We won a special award from schools in the county for getting kids to read – through Bookleggers, volunteers in the schools who offered book talks and helped with practice reading to enable students to master reading skills. Through this program and summer reading, the library was credited with raising reading scores in the county. (3) New buildings: New buildings were funded and built in many cities and neighborhoods served by the library. A new Main Library was built in Fremont with a major capital investment by the City and by Alameda County. The new Main Library included comfortable places for adults to read, welcoming places for teens to study, and joyous places for children and their families. The mayor of that city said "I have spent most of my public career funding jails - places to lock people up. How wonderful to fund a place for activities that might just keep people out of prison!"

Portland, Oregon (Multnomah County): In Multnomah County we secured voter approval for two capital bonds to renovate the 1912 Central Library and improve all branch libraries in the system. Branch libraries included historic renovations, major remodeling and additions, and new buildings. Each neighborhood library was different, to reflect its respective neighborhood, and alike in their organization for efficient and welcoming space for communities to gather. They became libraries that are centers of pride and service.

The Importance of a Central Library

These examples all involved two things: sustained and ongoing community engagement and good library buildings. To me, providing good service in a good building support one another. The service and community give the building life, while the building provides the infrastructure, space and inspiration for programs to succeed. I look forward to talking with you more about neighborhood library buildings soon, but today we are here to specifically talk about the Central Library.

A Central Library is so much more than a really large collection of books. It is the anchor and driver of a citywide system – the flagship. Central libraries serve public, administrative and operational functions. They serve and support the citywide branch system; provide opportunities for learning, information and exposure not possible in the branches; and – operationally – provide distribution, book processing, and ordering support for the entire city system. The Central Library needs everything from children's picture books to a tractor trailer loading dock.

Most important is the service possible in a central library. There is much that a Central Library can do that branches cannot but which benefit the entire community:

Collections of greater depth and breadth: Central libraries have not just more items, but more items on particular subjects that branches cannot contain. A Central Library is not just a warehouse for books and other materials. It is also a place where people can easily access the many resources of their library.

Specialized and One of a Kind Collections: A Central Library develops and maintains special historic, research and artistic collections. The DC Central Library contains many notable collections: Washingtoniana, Black Studies, the Washington Star photo collection, historic children's book illustrations, and rare musical scores –to name just a few of the gems in DC's current Martin Luther King Library.

Subject Expertise: Because a Central Library will have more librarians than a branch, they will be more familiar with the materials in one or two subject areas and can provide in-depth expertise to patrons.

Public Spaces: A Central Library can – and should – provide a variety of places for residents to gather, learn, be entertained or participate in discussions of local or national interests including an auditorium, meeting rooms of various sizes, galleries, activity rooms for children, or teen spaces – in greater size and number than neighborhood libraries.

Spaces Designed for Learning: A Central Library has space to provide in-depth learning facilities such as literacy training labs, computer trainings labs, classroom space, and places for tutors. It will also contain far more technology and public computer workstations.

We know these things to be true: The right environment will increase use, open floor space makes more efficient access and use of collections, and successful central libraries are living spaces that serve and reflect their residents and cities. Good library buildings open the way for good library service. We can build a library that works!

Central Libraries are powerful destinations, economic drivers, and – most of all – statements of the way we all – especially you – say you value these opportunities for residents. A powerful building will draw people in – new users and people who stopped using libraries a long time ago – and provide a place where people will discover the joy of learning, exploring, and the sheer pleasure of the library.

Most important, it is a public investment in building the lives of residents of the District. The Martin Luther King Library should be a library for this century, not the last. It will be equipped and staffed to address the needs of school children, job seekers, adults learning to read, those without access to computers or without the knowledge to use them. It will be a place for kids to discover the magic of books and libraries on a scale that will draw school classes, scout groups, youth clubs, and families from throughout the District and beyond. With this new library we will inspire and awe children and adults!

A fine and powerful central library says that a city values its residents, gives them a powerful place that is their own, and sends a message: the people who live here are worthy of a prime stake in the nation's capital. What stronger message can we send to our residents – and the world?

A child born today in the District could make her first school trip to the new MLK Library. What a way to start a new generation's relationship with their library. That child will be inspired to read, learn, and grow.

Together we can create a library that will stand for that child and for generations to come. I will do my part. I have come here to work with you and residents of this great city to create the library system they need and deserve.

Summary

And as I close, I want to speak as a librarian about to serve the people of the nation's capital. I have sketched for you how transformation is possible and can be done. I have spoken of a vision of what a Central Library can be and how it can serve our city.

But now I want to talk about how, should a renovation of 901 G Street be engaged, establishing temporary library space for what could be at least 4 years would impact the attempt to transform the DC library system. And I would like to propose an approach to providing system reform while creating a stunning space to house and announce that reform.

As I come here I will be faced with multiple challenges to rebuild a struggling system. Our library needs improvement in collections, customer service, staffing, and programming. Can we move forward on these critically important service fronts when the central library is literally in pieces – for years? Trying to improve service and workforce while attempting to operate a piecemeal temporary situation is neigh unto impossible and setting ourselves up for failure.

In the year 2000, \$140 million of funding was secured for a new central library for Minneapolis, Minnesota, to replace the library built in the 1960s. Another downtown site was sought, but not available for less than \$10 million. The decision was made to move the current library to an interim site, and build the new library on the site of the existing building. The total cost of the temporary space, including moving and lease costs, was \$10 million. The temporary location did not serve the community well. Use was much less, and about 70% of the collection was in storage and not readily available. The beautiful new library opened just two weeks ago, to much community approval. Many agreed that if they had known that the cost of the temporary library would be equal to the costs of another site, they might have decided to stay in the original library until the new one was completed.

Creating improved service delivery and workforce can efficiently be done at 901 G Street while a new library is being constructed off-site. This is how most library systems have chosen to proceed – and with good reason. New programs can be piloted and developed; staff training and upgrading can occur, strategic planning for the new central library can take place. Let 901 G Street be the incubator for what will inhabit the new central library. Let's ensure that when the new library opens, there will be capacity and ability to fill it.

Let's plan for the long run. We have an opportunity to create the service and operational improvements that are desperately needed and then place them in a building that will support and embody a capital library – in every way: from its look and its presence, to the experience of those who use that library.

Members of the City Council, you have before you an opportunity that may not come again any time soon. Residents of this city deserve a library that generates excitement, improves life, and provides access to knowledge – a library system that works - anchored by a new central library.

We have a unique chance to leverage significant federal and private dollars and to harness the vision of residents, philanthropists, and legislators on the Hill.

I urge you to make a decision that is right for the District. To do it right and to do it now.

In the words of Toni Morrison: "Access to knowledge is the superb, the supreme act of truly great civilizations. Of all the institutions that purport to do this, free libraries stand virtually alone in accomplishing this mission. No committee decides who may enter, no crisis of body or spirit must accompany the entrant. No tuition is charged, no oath sworn, no visa demanded. Of the monuments humans build for themselves, very few say 'Touch me, use me, my hush is not indifference, my space is not a barrier. If I inspire awe, it is because I am in awe of you and the possibilities that dwell in you.'"
